Strategic Communication: Distortion and White Noise

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Editorial Abstract: The author examines the current state of Strategic Communication, highlighting a lack of clarity in US Government guidance, and a range of confusion-inducing behaviors and attitudes among different departments. He proposes doctrinal and educational solutions to help curb current levels of 'information fratricide.'

Introduction

Strategic Communication (SC) is a relatively new construct to the Department of Defense (DOD) and its component services and agencies. The relationship between SC and other DOD activities is currently evolving at the highest levels of the department. This state of flux had led to widespread misunderstanding and to misguided efforts by lower echelons to define SC, often in ways to advance their organizational interests. The absence of unified direction permits DOD components to create messages and themes that compete with those SC is intended to communicate.

Joint doctrine recognizes that lower echelon components may define a term differently, and it further stipulates that in such cases joint doctrine takes precedence. Such a hierarchy of terminology is a coherent and useful means to permit freedom of action at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war, and enables the Services to conduct their Title X responsibilities (organize, train, and equip) with greater efficiency and effectiveness.

Nevertheless, such a hierarchical construct cannot be applied to Strategic Communication without destroying its meaning. The process that is SC is intrinsically anchored to the President's policies, therefore it cannot be separated from the content it conveys.

SC is intended to enable unified action throughout the interagency environment. DOD in its entirety can only support, as one of numerous players —although often the most visible and well resourced—the larger executive branch-wide effort.

This article examines the nature of strategic communication, current joint and service SC doctrine, assesses the unnecessary friction created by these various constructs, and makes recommendations for improving SC unity of effort.

What is Strategic Communication?

Strategic communication is the process to synchronize the actions and verbal communications of all departments and independent agencies of the executive branch, in order to make real the President's policies and achieve his desired ends. "SC is not the creation of policy, it is the process —specifically, the synchronization of disparate operations, activities and other efforts—to achieve the goals or objectives of *National policy and strategy*." [Emphasis added.] (Dr. Steve Cambone, Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, 11 December 2006, USSOCOM Conference.)

Employing SC-like processes to pursue lower-echelons ends, regardless of those ends' value, means that such actions can not be considered strategic communication. "Policies and strategic communication cannot be separated." (Defense Science Board, 2004, p. 3)

SC involves all elements of national power: diplomatic, information, military, and economic (DIME). Strategic communication processes and supporting capabilities must be included in "all aspects of the federal government's activities and synchronized vertically and horizontally." (Murphy, et al., 2006, p. 55) Any DOD programs or actions to support SC must be synchronized, via interagency coordination, throughout the executive branch of the USG, to ensure coherent physical and informational activities. "There is no single lead agency with formal tasking authority responsible for developing an information strategy for promoting and magnifying the USG's goals and objectives." (Ecklund, 2005, p. 6) Simply, the various USG departments, agencies, and organizations must coordinate what they say and do to create unity of effort. "Strategic Communication must include themes, synchronized across the departments and agencies, and messages reinforced by premeditated actions." (Josten, 2006, p. 16.)

Operationalizing SC

SC is not a capability, and military commanders do not control SC assets. However, commanders engage in certain activities that provide enormous utility to communicate SC themes and messages. Unfortunately, doctrine released by the Joint Staff diverges from that provided by the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) on what these activities are. The Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) *Execution Roadmap for Strategic Communication* (hereafter, SC Roadmap), dated 25 September 2006, identifies five primary communication supporting capabilities:

1. Public Affairs
2. Aspects of Information Operations, principally Psychological Operations
3. Military Diplomacy
4. Defense Support to Public Diplomacy
5. Visual Information, principally Combat Camera.

Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning*, dated 26 December 2006, states that the "predominant military activities that promote SC themes and messages are:
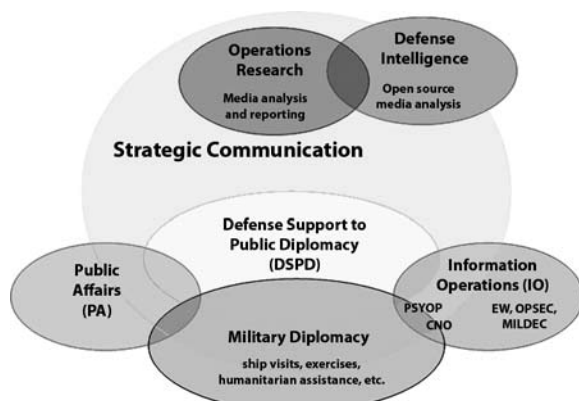
Figure 1. The relationship of DOD support to the larger USG SC process. The inclusion of feedback mechanisms, media analysis under Operations Research, and Defense Intelligence, is notable and are critical to understanding key audiences. It further illustrates ongoing efforts to provide greater granularity to SC at the highest levels of DOD

1. Information Operations
2. Public Affairs
3. Defense Support to Public Diplomacy

Clearly the tools and capabilities available to joint commanders for coordination under SC are important. Inconsistent identification of the capabilities in these documents can create unnecessary confusion among lower echelons. To illustrate, even Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) institutions such as Joint Forces Staff College have inaccurately equated SC as the sum of the various identified DOD capabilities.

Nevertheless, by identifying only capabilities that function primarily in the informational dimension of the information environment, these documents lend themselves to further misinterpretation. All military activities have a communication element. SC is the broadly overarching concept targeting key audiences and focusing on the cognitive dimension of the information environment. Strategic communication seeks to create effects in the cognitive, vice informational, dimension of the information environment. (Army War College, 2006, p. 12)

By comparison, capabilities such as PA and IO are frequently employed to create effects in the informational dimension. Certainly informational dimension effects can subsequently create second-order cognitive effects. Nevertheless, it is overly restrictive to assert such indirect means are the only—or even the primary—means of creating effects in the cognitive dimension. The coordination and integrated planning of kinetic military activities is potentially the most unambiguous SC capability.

Strategic Communication is neither a subset nor a product of the information element of national power. Rather, SC focuses activities of all four DIME elements across the physical, informational, and cognitive dimensions of the information domain on key audiences to achieve specific effects (see figure 2). SC processes and supporting capabilities must be included in all aspects of the federal government's activities and synchronized vertically and horizontally (Murphy, et al., 2006, p. 55.)

The SC construct recognizes the interdependency of the elements of national power, and seeks to maximize such power through the integration and synchronization of the DIME. SC orchestrates appropriate elements of national power through synchronized lines of operation to influence behavior of the target audience. "(S)trategic communication planning identifies those combinations of kinetic and non-kinetic actions and words that are most likely to produce the desired understanding and actions in key audiences, and then… synchronize those (capabilities) that need to

be engaged" (DASD(JC), USJFCOM Briefing, 2007.)

SC is employed to create cognitive effects in order to elicit specific behavior or actions from identified groups or individuals. As SC focuses on specific audiences, the diplomatic, economic, and particularly the military elements of national power can often times be leveraged more effectively than can the information element to create the desired effects. The arrival on-station of a carrier strike group, or a decline in tax revenue due to US-sponsored trade sanctions, are much more likely to create intense and immediate cognitive effects on a nation's decision-makers than any mass media delivered information.

White Noise: Contradictions in Joint Doctrine

Even within joint doctrine, the significance and nature of strategic communication can be inconsistent and obfuscating. Although the doctrinal definition recognizes that interagency nature of SC, the recently updated JP 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning*, states:

Strategic communication (SC) is a natural extension of strategic direction, and supports the President's strategic guidance, the Sec Def's National Defense Strategy, and the CJCS's National Military Strategy.
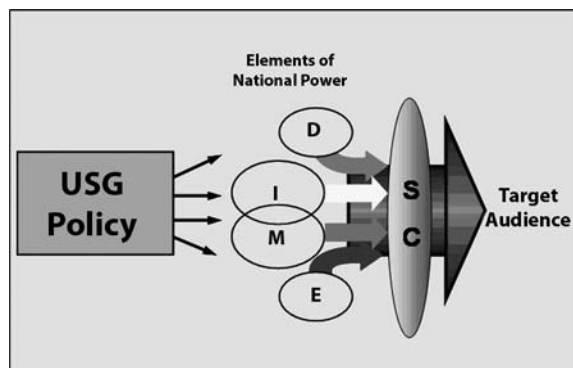

Figure 2. Transformation of national policy into action as elements of national power are focused via the SC "lens." An unnecessary ambiguity is the intersection of the Informational and Military elements, while the Economic and Diplomatic do not. Considering Defense Support to Public Diplomacy is one of the primary capabilities supporting SC, at the least the Military and Diplomatic elements should intersect. (Recreated - DASD (Joint Communication) briefing, Jan 07)

Non-DOD organizations, while participating in strategic communication, will obviously not do so to support strategies released by the Sec Def or CJCS. Rather, what is being discussed here is the DOD subset of the SC process. JP 5-0 continues:

SC planning and execution focus capabilities that apply information as an instrument of national power to create, strengthen, or preserve an information environment favorable to US national interests.

Although SC achieves effects in the information environment, as discussed above, it does not merely "apply information as an instrument of national power." It focuses all four elements of national power, applying the diplomatic, military, and economic instruments of national power in concert with information.

> *'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, `it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less.'*
>
> *'The question is,' said Alice,' whether you can make words mean so many different things.'*
>
> *'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, which is to be master -- that's all.'*
>
> *-- Lewis Carroll,* **Through the Looking Glass**, *1871*

Signal Distortion: Diverging Definitions

Despite Strategic Communication having been defined under joint doctrine, many players inconsistently employ the term it in such a manner as to render it meaningless. The most frequent errors are (1) the separation of SC from its national-level content and (2) divorcing SC from kinetic activities and restricting it to informational communication capabilities (i.e., words alone, not actions.) Some of the more egregious errors can be found in service doctrine and policy as we shall see in current Air Force and Navy writings.

US Air Force efforts in strategic communication are summarized in a standard briefing entitled Strategic Communication 101. Of note, this briefing was presented to the Joint Staff-hosted 2006 World Wide IO Conference (WWIO) and currently serves as a standard service resource available at the Air Force Portal website. This briefing, used to shape service members' understanding of and contribution to SC, eliminates the link with national-level concerns and limits SC largely to being a task of the service's public affairs offices.

The Air Force defines strategic communication as "the process of informing and appropriately influencing key audiences by synchronizing and integrating communication efforts to deliver truthful, credible, accurate and timely information."

The Air Force SC mission is not tied to higher-echelon policies or guidance. Rather, the Air Force conducts SC "to foster, mutually beneficial relationships between the Air Force and its strategic stakeholders." Stated USAF mission support objectives are:

1. Increase awareness of and support for the US Air Force
2. Strengthen trust relationships with key audiences
3. Ensure accurate and timely data in the information domain
4. Develop effects-based, proactive, long-term focused communication processes
5. Enable Airmen to tell The Air Force Story (SC 101, slide 10)

The SC 101 briefing states that every Airman is a communicator whose SC role is to "promote the Air Force to external audiences." Air Force Public Affairs releases expand upon this briefing. Sounding like a sister-service satire on the Air Force's overly corporate culture, these releases discuss employing SC to better position the "Air Force brand" while helping to shape "the future debate about military roles and missions." (Weckerlein, 2006)

Having built what amounts to a marketing mechanism in the competition for public goodwill and budgetary considerations relative to the other armed services, the 'S' in Air Force 'SC' should stand for 'service' vice 'strategic'. The Air Force makes no pretense that its SC efforts support national level policies, vice parochial bureaucratic interests.

SC 101 clearly orients Air Force SC toward domestic audiences. Notably, the Air Force defines SC as "appropriately influencing key audiences." Despite the use of the mitigating 'appropriately,' such phrasing seemingly endorses activities that would violate the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act. This law prohibits the employment of information to "influence public opinion in the United States." Air Force employment of strategic communication processes to advance the service's interests by influencing, appropriately or otherwise, a domestic audience would appear to violate federal law.

The current capstone document on Navy SC is *Playbook 2005: Navy Strategic Communication Plan*. This document incorporates strategic communication as a mechanism to distribute themes and messages advancing the interests of the Navy as a service. USN Strategic Communication themes and messages in this document make no pretense to uphold any policies outside those of the service:

1. Mission First, People Always
2. Transforming Naval Forces
3. Excellence in Warfighting

While the interests of the Navy as a warfighting organization are the ultimate basis for the military element of national power, such themes bear no direct relation to Presidential ends or policies.

This document further dissociates Navy SC from the current interagency construct when it identifies target audiences for Navy strategic communication:

"Our primary internal communication goal is to ensure that our sailors and their families understand that they are at the core of our readiness and operational effectiveness. Furthermore, we want them to know that Navy leadership appreciates the sacrifices they make and is committed to providing both quality of life and career opportunities.

Our primary external goal is to communicate to the American people

—our customers—that our people are the best, our strategy is sound, and the Navy is a solid investment in our nation's security." (p.18)

Playbook 2005 subordinates SC to the Navy's public affairs community, the "trigger pullers on the information battlefield" (Dept. of the Navy, Playbook, p. 2). In doing so, it replaces national-level processes to advance Presidential policies to being merely an improved mechanism for internal communication with sailors and for public relations with the taxpayer.

Broken and Unreadable: The Impact of White Noise on SC

The Air Force and Navy, having conflated service interests with national interests, create competing signal content in the public information environment. Such competing information can drown out the content that strategic communication should relay, leading to content fratricide.

These service functions have further, albeit indirect, costs to national-level SC. Under Title X, the US Armed Forces are responsible to organize, train, and equip in support of the operational combatant commands. As warfighting organizations, the COCOMs are the DOD entities most likely to participate in national-level strategic communication. The Services' failure to train and indoctrinate its officers on strategic communication inflicts an opportunity cost on the combatant commands. That is, the COCOMs must assume responsibility for indoctrinating, training, and educating its assigned service officers on strategic communication.

"Joint officers are built upon service officers... possessing an unprecedented ability to integrate diverse elements in a complex environment." (CJCS, 2005, p. 4) This CJCS Vision for Joint Officer Development specifically addresses JPME and applicable joint career force training. Nevertheless, it is a succinct and accurate description of the SC staff officer the services should be developing

for the combatant commands. SC staff officers must be capable of proficiently functioning not only jointly, but throughout the interagency environment. By redefining it as a 'parochial interest support function,' the services fail to instill an accurate understanding of SC across the officer corps.

Strategic Communication Integration Group: Squelching White Noise

In an effort to better integrate national strategic communication support, the Deputy Secretary of Defense created a senior-level DOD Strategic Communication Integration Group
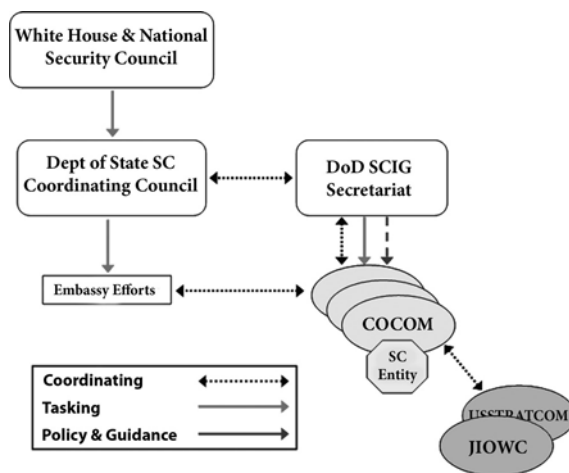

Figure 3. The SCIG Secretariat plays a crucial role in coordinating the operational efforts of the Combatant Commanders to ensure DOD activities are in concert with and support the wider interagency SC efforts. (Adopted and simplified from Josten, 2006, p. 18)

(SCIG) in April 2006. The SCIG ensures the Department's SC strategies, plans, and programs are supportive of the President's national security and foreign policy goals. (Army War College, 2006, p. 81)

A sixteen person Directorate composed representatives from OSD and the Joint Staff supports this body:

• Under Secretary for Policy (3)
• Under Secretary for Intelligence (1)
• Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness (1)
• Asst Secretary for PA (1)
• Comptroller (1)
• Joint Staff (8)

The SCIG Directorate coordinates Combatant Command actions in support of SC with guidance from the Joint Staff, OSD, and across the interagency environment (see figure 3). "For Combatant Commanders to successfully implement SC, they must have an unequivocal definition of the overall US Government policy in dealing with a particular issue or regional objective." (Perkins & Scott, 2006, p. 27) The Directorate provides guidance at the field-grade level to Combatant Command staffs to increase SC signal fidelity.

Conclusion

The absence of clarity on Strategic Communication from the highest levels of DOD leaves a void that lower echelons attempt to fill. Perhaps to be expected, those components have attached parochial content to SC, thereby creating competing information to the themes and messages intended to support realization of national-level policy.

Beyond the content conveyed by SC, this doctrinal ambiguity creates confusion for operational-level commanders whose kinetic actions are frequently the most dramatic mechanisms supporting Strategic Communication. Nevertheless, joint doctrine misguidedly limits SC to the information element of national power, ignoring the kinetic options —often violent and lethal—available to the COCOMs and JTF commanders.

The Department must provide consistent doctrinal and policy guidance regarding DOD support of national-level strategic communication. Moreover, educating the officer corps on the nature of SC should become a priority. In the two decades since the Goldwater-Nichols Act, the career officer has become fully joint. For DOD operations to integrate completely with the USG strategic communication process, the armed forces must now build a career officer with the expertise to function in the interagency environment. They can

begin to do by codifying what SC is and is not. Strategic communication is not merely the effective marketing of the President's policies: SC achieves those policies.

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